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ABSTRACT

The relationship between well being and expectations is complicated and contingent upon many factors. Self-esteem becomes the balance between ability and ambition. To feel better about oneself entails a combination of striving in certain areas while lowering expectations in others. The three most important domains of peoples' lives are: love relationships, parenting, and work. Expectations need to be balanced among the demands of these three domains, but if there is not some failure in at least one of these areas some of the times, then the expectations may not be sufficiently challenging. In long-term love relationships, unrealistic expectations can be damaging. When it comes to parenting, the ambitions of many parents are driving themselves and their children to exhaustion. The constantly changing technology in the workplace is adding to stress and burnout. In trying to get expectations properly in balance, advocate for yourself and others. The idea is to aim high, but be flexible and ready to redefine success whenever necessary. (Contains 14 references.) (JDM)

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Prevailing in Life and Love:

An Educator's View of the Role of Our Expectations

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Prevailing in our lives has a lot to do with the expectations we fashion, both for ourselves and for those we love. There are both pros and cons associated with having high expectations.

On the positive side, setting ambitious goals and being optimistic about your chances of fulfilling them are associated with various types of success and achievement. Those who take the time to formulate clear objectives, and struggle to make their dreams a reality, often report higher levels of satisfaction with their lives.

Setting lofty goals is certainly far better than believing that you're helpless and that things are hopeless. These attitudes just produce passivity and inaction, contributing to something researchers have dubbed learned helplessness (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993; Seligman, 1991; Seligman, 1992). We've found that various animals, including dogs, mice, and pigeons, learn to simply give up when faced with too many uncontrollable adverse situations. When this happens, evolution has designed organisms to go into a conservation mode of inactivity; in humans we call it depression. The only way out, short of taking Prozac or some other SSRI antidepressant medication, is to force ourselves to try again and avail ourselves of the opportunity to obtain some positive feedback. When cognitive therapists work their magic with depressed patients, it's because they challenge the negative thinking that serves as an obstacle to acting (Chambliss, 2000). It really is little more than a variation of the old "get back on the horse" advice people have been giving each other for decades.

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If we don't resume activity, we tend to get stuck in a vicious cycle: believing that nothing will help, we stop doing; not doing cheats us out of the opportunity to experience the success we need; this affirms the notion that we are inadequate, further reducing motivation to act and so on.

So when we're hit with lousy luck, we need to fight back and keep hoping. We need to recognize that bad events aren't always our fault, and that the doldrums are temporary.

Persisting is often made easier if we can distract ourselves by focusing on other things in our lives that are going better at the moment. Research has long demonstrated the psychological protection offered by multiple roles (Barnett & Rivers, 1996). One of the reason why women who juggle multiple roles (for instance spouse, mother, and worker roles) handle stress better is that frustration in one role can be offset by gratification in another role (that's a variation on the old "don't put all your eggs in one basket" advice). Ofcourse there are particularly black days, when everything seems to go sour all at once. I recall one especially rainy April, when I had four kids with chicken pox, my husband had to be out of town, and the academic semester was crashing to a close. The reassurance offered by those studies on multiple roles didn't do much for me at that point, and the "juggling" got pretty ugly. But that, too, passed rather quickly.

Of all the things I've done, writing books has most tested my forbearance. Persisting in the face of piles of rejection letters became easier as I went along, because I became desensitized and because it became rather funny. I was writing about time sensitive things, so I felt a pressure to get things in print quickly, but since the editors hadn't read yet about some of the issues, they didn't think they were important yet. It was really fairly absurd.

I'd tolerate the ongoing discouragement by focusing on other things I valued even more than the work...my children, my garden...all were growing far better than the book. That's what kept me going. And eventually things worked out the way I had wanted them to.

Risks of Excessive Expectations

But, can having high expectations ever backfire? Can having excessively high goals and standards make you miserable? You bet! Just think about all the folks who race through their highly accomplished lives never feeling good enough. Many superbly achieving people never feel they've done quite enough.

Perfectionism can swipe the joy out of everything. Tyrannical standards can make everything we or others do seem woefully deficient. Many years ago, one of the first psychologists, William James, pointed out that self esteem involves a delicate balance between our competence and our ambition. As a result, there are essentially two ways to feel better about yourself. One is to actually become better, the other is to simply expect a little less.

Easing up on unreasonable standards often works better than knocking yourself out trying to reach some ideal weight, keep the house picture-perfect, or make sure everyone around you is happy all the time. Taking a close look on unreasonable personal standards can be extremely liberating.

So, the relationship between wellbeing and expectations isn't a simple, straightforward one. Researchers would say it's not linear, it's curvilinear, meaning that too little can be as bad as too much, and that we should aim for some balanced place in the middle. With that mindset, let's look at the three most important domains of our lives: love relationships, parenting, and work.

Longterm love relationships

In longterm love relationships, unrealistic expectations are frequently fatal! Even those who have abandoned some of the old unrealistic expectations of relationships, such as the quest for simultaneous orgasms, can get into real trouble by aiming for other improbable things. One risk involves not taking into account our biological propensities, and how these structure how loving relationships tend to change over time.

Our biological underpinnings don't tend to favor successful decades-long romantic relationships. In many primitive cultures, which provide conditions more similar to those under which evolution did its selecting for central nervous system qualities, the average heterosexual couple parts company after four years, with each partner moving on to a new mate (Fisher, 1982). The reproductive advantage to having multiple romantic relationships over time lies in the value of pairing one's DNA with multiple alternatives. The chances of one of these many combinations giving rise to an offspring with the rare ability to survive extremely harsh conditions to reproductive maturity is greater than the chances of children from a single mate. So, back when evolution was establishing how we're wired, systems favoring multiple matings were more successful in reproducing over time.

Evolution wired us to pass through 3 stages in love: lust, infatuation, and attachment. All 3 are governed by different hormones and neurochemicals. Lust is driven primarily by testosterone levels, infatuation by dopamine, adrenaline, and serotonin levels, and attachment by oxytocin and vasopressin levels.

We tend to get into trouble when we mistake transitions from one to the next stage as signalling the tragic end of "true love", as signs that "the relationship is over" and should be abandoned. When we bail because we miss the excitement associated with the first stages, we cause ourselves and others a lot of pain, and sacrifice longterm connections. We lose the people who own memories of our youth (Edwards, Winters, Rogers, Levengood, Ottaviano & Chambliss, 1995; Levengood, Ottaviano & Chambliss, 1996).

So what are we to do? It's important to recognize that the tide runs against longterm relationship bliss; success will require effort. If one gets lazy and does only what comes naturally,

there's a real risk that a relationship will founder.

One helpful strategy is to consciously strive to notice and prize the good moments we have with partners. Our brains are biased to detect the negative; we have to fight to keep our critical bias from eclipsing our view of what is working pretty well.

Building longterm relationships also requires scaling back on the expectations that the early lust and infatuation should last. Our brains just aren't built that way.

We should also abandon the expectation that if these feelings arise toward a new person, that this means we've "finally found the real thing" and that we should pursue that relationship in favor of one that has moved to the attachment stage. We need to recognize this trick our brains can play, and realize that all relationships will eventually settle down.

We need to learn to appreciate the special promise of a longterm relationship. Deepening the intimacy and empathy within a longterm relationship can be as exciting, and as scary, as a new one.

Now, these are things many women have voiced for some time. There is some suggestion in the literature that women appreciate these issues more readily than many men. If so, maybe women need to make a more concerted effort to enlighten their sons.

Parenting

When it comes to parenting, it seems that these days the outrageous ambitions of many parents are driving themselves crazy! Some parents feel that if their children aren't in all accelerated classes, deemed "gifted" by the school psychologist, getting straight As, scoring superbly on the soccer field, and mastering at least one musical instrument, then the parents are failures (DiBlassio, Calore & Chambliss, 2000).

We've managed to make parenting even harder than the near impossible job it always was! Why?

The reasons are manifold, but many of our ever-rising standards in parenting seem indirectly attributable to residual ambivalence about lifestyle changes. We're still adjusting to the changing role of women in the workplace. Mothers' having the option of working is taking a toll.

The moms who work outside the home feel they have to parent perfectly to prove they're not harming their children by working. They sometimes make unreasonable sacrifices to compensate and reduce their guilt (Gustafson, Chambliss, Rojas & Murgia, 1996).

The moms who don't work outside the home often feel defensive about it, and need to parent perfectly in order to justify their lives. The more they do with or for their children, the more the employed moms feel they must do to not look inadequate (Domingo, Keppley & Chambliss, 1997).

So this spiraling interplay creates escalating pressure on both groups of mothers. Both groups are constantly at risk of feeling in the wrong. Sadly, this tension cheats mothers out of chances to celebrate their shared experiences and accomplishments.

So what are we to do about this one? It is extremely important to remember that the most important thing parents have to offer their children is unconditional love, and acceptance of where they are at the moment. Others will always be pressuring them to do and to change. No one loves them for just being them as much as we do.

No one so strongly adores how they are at this minute, and so passionately regrets each passing day. As parents, we are in a highly ambivalent position with our children, because as much as we can't wait to know the fabulous adults they will become, with every step our children take in the direction of independence, we lose them a little bit more. The one good thing about this tragic reality is that it puts us in position where its so easy to genuinely value them in the present, with no strings attached. What a gift we give them, when we enjoy them as they are, imperfections included. We need to catch them being good, and rave whenever some glimmer of cooperative, caring behavior is spotted.

Also, thanks to the tireless research efforts of Erel, Oberman, and Yirmiya (2000), reported in the September Psychological Bulletin, these two groups of women can now shake hands and declare a truce. These researchers' metaanalysis of over 50 studies on the effects of maternal employment on children resoundingly showed that there are no advantages or disadvantages associated with mother's working or not working. It was a wash across many, many studies and many, many measures. Kids can thrive either way. We can stop making each other feel guilty. For at least a week, anyway.

We can also try to make it easier on the next generation. Research I've done over many years at Ursinus indicates that mothers have a big influence on the attitudes of their sons. I've often felt that one of the best ways I could help the feminist cause is to raise wonderful, egalitarian sons. They cook, they clean, they cry! (No, just kidding about that last one...you can impose your politics just so far).

Workplace

When it comes to work, all the technological progress we're making sometimes seems to be burning us out faster than ever! The unquestioning championing of change overlooks the inefficiency it produces. We move onto new software before our offices ever fully master the old. We have a lingering feeling that things could go wrong any moment, and that we're insufficiently expert to fix the system. Any moment, the system could fail, making our work impossible.

The expectation of 24/7 access and activity needs to be reigned in. It's easy to feel that you're falling behind every minute you work...while you're at a meeting or writing, both your voice mail and your email is accumulating. For every hour you've worked, you've fallen two hours behind! The "If I don't immerse myself in the internet, I'll miss out" mentality can be a dark cloud hanging over you at all times.

People's expectations of each other are getting more and more

unreasonable. In a research study some of my students recently conducted, we found that although the majority admitted to never getting around to reading over half of the email they receive, 90% expected others to respond to any email they sent within 24 hours (Brackin, Ferguson, Skelly, & Chambliss, 2000)! That's not fair. Some people assume we all have our email on 100% of the time. People seem to be much more willing to make requests of us via email than via phone or face-to-face.

So what are we to do about this set of challenges? For one, we can insist that these issues get acknowledged as legitimate concerns. It is not a symptom of "Luddite-ism" to engage in a cost-benefit analysis before embracing the next wave of technology. It's smart to consider all the ramifications of innovation. We need to inject discussions about quality of life into workplace discussions about uses of technology. Don't allow this issue to be ignored.

It's also helpful to compartmentalize work and protect your life. Setting reasonable limits on the work you do at home is vital. Let people know if you don't read your email every minute, in order to avoid misunderstandings.

It is also more important than ever to recognize the need to refuel your spirit. Don't feel guilty about not producing every minute. It's not selfish to pay attention to your own needs: doing so will give you the stamina to keep giving to others.

The experience of many of my clients also attests to the value of cutting corners where ever you can! Clarify your values and priorities, and let the unimportant things that waste your precious time fall by the wayside (Shokouhi-Behnam & Chambliss, 1996). Here are some confessions: I've never folded any children's clothes: they;ve always gotten dumped into baskets.
I haven't ironed for thirty-five years. I dust with dimmer switches! Things look much cleaner when it's almost dark.
But watch out for excesses: My son recently started using Febreze (a spray product that promises to rid clothes of odors) instead of doing his laundry.

It also is helpful to delegate anything you can! No one person can do it all. But in delegating, don't retain the job of project manager. Give the whole task away, and resist the tendency to tell a partner or child how it really should have been done. Part of why many women find themselves overburdened is because they sometimes have trouble relinquishing the role of standard-setter. They want things done their way (translate: the "right" way). and inadvertently undermine others who pitch in by criticizing their efforts. In the long run, it doesn't usually matter if things are done just so. After all, doesn't your having time to breathe matter more than the floors being perfect?

So, in trying to get your expectations properly balanced, be a cheerleader for yourself and others, but not a tyrannical one. Expect false starts and missteps: without them, you'd never learn. If you're not failing some of the time, you're not challenging yourself sufficiently. Aim high, but be flexible and ready to redefine success whenever you have to.

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